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ABSTRACT

Spiritual living demands growth, and spiritual development has many parallels with human development. Ministers who are knowledgeable of the various stages are best prepared to assist and optimize spiritual growth. The primary benefit of nurturing believers through developmental stages is assured spiritual health and maturity in the context of a strong church family. The "Spiritual Growth and Development Table" briefly outlines the following seven stages of spiritual development: Values Rationale (loosely based on research conducted by Lawrence Kohlberg); Bible Study Nutrition; Prayer and Communication; Nurture, Shelter, and Protection; Evangelism; Ministry Opportunities; and Concerns and Dangers. (BT)

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Spiritual Growth and Development

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Spiritual Growth and Development

Few things are as disheartening to ministers as spiritually handicapped, dysfunctional, or "dead" believers. Such members are usually the result of arrested spiritual development. Spiritual living demands growth, for there is no maintaining the status quo in the Christian life. Grow or die appears to be a law of nature that has implications for ministers who daily relate to developing Christians in a hostile world.

As ministers we are often viewed as spiritual guardians of congregations. Like parents raising large families, we are faced with meeting the spiritual needs of each member of our congregation. One of the chief difficulties in raising a large family is balancing parental expectations a child's abilities. Conscientious ministers do well to understand the various stages of spiritual development and acknowledge their responsibility in helping a spiritual baby develop into a mature Christian.

Spiritual development has many parallels with human development. The notion of development suggests our members go through predictable stages from spiritual conception through maturity. Each stage brings milestones, opportunities, and concerns. Ministers who are knowledgeable of these various stages are best prepared to assist and optimize spiritual growth. The primary benefit of nurturing believers through developmental stages is assured spiritual health and maturity in the context of a strong church family.

Just as sound prenatal care is essential for future physical growth, conscientious "pre-birth" care for future believers is essential. Spiritual birth should be the result of a covenant relationship between God and a believer based upon unconditional love. This marriage is the

foundation for a Christian family. If a commitment to a covenant of unconditional love and spiritual childrearing are absent, irresponsible evangelism will result. Just as newborns face insurmountable survival problems when abandoned, spiritual newborns will almost certainly fail to reach spiritual maturity if abandoned to the world after a successful evangelistic experience. "Promiscuous evangelism" is probably the primary reason why the majority of new believers fail to survive.

Once the seed of the Gospel has taken root in a new believer a period of careful, protective nurturing is essential. This period of nurturing is the responsibility of the new believer's spiritual parents or guardians and should probably precede a public declaration, though many churches choose to present their newborns before spiritual survival is adequately insured. Many Asian cultures do not consider newborns as having survived birth until they have lived one-hundred days. At the *Hundredth Day Celebration* the parents present their new child to the extended family and community.

The *Spiritual Growth and Development Table* briefly outlines seven stages of spiritual development. Ministers and church volunteers should be aware of the developmental characteristics of the groups with which they are working. Progress from dependence (childhood), to independence (youth), then interdependence (adulthood) is a reoccurring theme in development. Treating all church family members in the same manner will likely result in unbalanced individuals and weak churches.

Values Rationale suggests approaches different age groups often use in making moral decisions and is loosely based upon research conducted by Lawrence Kohlberg (Kohlberg, 1969). Children are most likely to ask, "What will happen to me?" Youth ask, "Will I fit in and be

accepted?" Mature adults are concerned with order and inner principles for living. Knowing how humans reason in different stages of development can assist ministers in reaching and appealing to specific groups. For example, Heaven and Hell are very significant concepts to children. Peer group consensus is more important than punishment or rewards to most youth. Adults focus upon the personal rights of others and eventually upon universal principles for living, such as the Two Great Commandments outlined by Jesus in the Gospels. Moral concern usually moves from a consideration of "me" (selfish) as child, to "us" (my group) as a youth, and then eventually includes "them" (those outside my group) as adults.

Bible Study Nutrition suggests Bible study is "spiritual eating." Continued health and growth requires the selection, preparation, and eating of a balanced diet. Infants and children find this an impossible task. Most youngsters prefer Twinkies to sound nutrition. Adults enjoy a balanced diet that meets a wide variety of nutritional requirements. If one considers Bible study as "food" the notion of eating, selection, method of preparation, recipes, restaurants, atmosphere, and a variety of other culinary concepts take on new meaning. How does your congregation "dine?"

Prayer and Communication deals with a believer's ability to communicate spiritual ideas and complete spiritual tasks. Development in this area moves from virtual inability, to imitation, then onward to personally defined action. Ministers should not underestimate the value of imitation in teaching children. Youth grow when they become involved *with others* in ministry. Adults need continued involvement and opportunities for leadership.

Nurture, Shelter & Protection addresses a believer's need for protection and an overtly Christian environment. The family or the church is the protective environment God has provided

for spiritual development. The church family represents shelter and a safe environment for growth. Children require a home and nurturing family, youth want to venture outward, and adults are able to build or find new homes as needed.

Evangelism deals with a believer's ability to share the Gospel effectively and follow-up with the intensive nurturing a new believer will need. Children have limited effectiveness as evangelists and must rely heavily upon others. Youth have a tendency to evangelize with zeal, but are rarely committed to long-term nurturing and may abandon new converts. Adults have the ability to evangelize effectively and provide the spiritual nurturing necessary for survival.

Ministry Opportunities and *Concerns and Danger* generalize about the pros and cons of each stage of development. As ministers become familiar with the nature of each developmental stage, ideas for ministry will follow. The major area of concern is providing room for growth and development.

Spiritual guardians will find raising future ministers and a strong spiritual family much easier if they are aware of a believer's passage through these stages. Spiritual guardians should also be aware of their own developmental goals and needs. Interdependency between local ministers and church families enhances growth. Continued maturity relies upon moving through each stage and emerging as a balanced, responsible believer who is able to be discerning and lead others as they grow. Those who integrate their lives into the lives of others face exciting growth and are a blessing to all they encounter.

Kohlberg, L. (1969). *Stage and Sequence: The Cognitive-Developmental Approach to Socialization*. In D. S. Goslin (Ed.), Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research. Chicago: Rand McNally.

Spiritual Growth and Development

Spiritual Development Stage	Values Rationale	Bible Study Nutrition	Prayer Communication	Nurture, Shelter & Protection	Evangelism Procreation	Ministry Opportunities	Concerns and Dangers
	Dependency		**Focus on Self**				
Early Childhood	Rewards & punishment	Totally dependent. Only able to digest the simplest of verses. Unable to feed self.	Observer. Watches others to learn.	Totally dependent. Needs others for protection and basic care.	Dependent upon family for evangelism and follow-up.	Very teachable and trusting. Thrives upon attention.	If effective follow-up is lacking, future development will be impaired.
Childhood	Reciprocal contracts. "You do for me, I do for you."	Dependent. Able to appreciate biblical truths, but unable to select and prepare spiritual food	Observer and imitator. Watches others and imitates family members and others.	Dependent. Can identify simple dangers and follow simple rules. Needs protective supervision.	May share simple truths, but dependent upon family for effective evangelism and follow-up.	Wants to please family. Enjoys showing how they are like their parents and family.	Will imitate and learn undesirable behavior if not given good models.
	Independence		**Focus on Peers**				
Early Youth	Acceptance by others is the ultimate value.	Semi-dependent. Able to identify spiritual truths. Taste rules over nutrition.	Imitator and beginning practitioner. Experiments with prayer and spiritual practices.	Has a basic understanding of good and bad. Looks to others for guidance. Vulnerable.	Can share simple testimony, but needs a family to support and follow-up.	Beginning to need involvement with others and a role in the family. Service oriented.	Vulnerable to media. Connections with unsuitable peer groups will have great influence.
Youth	"Search for self." Values flow from self in a peer-ruled context.	Semi - independent. Can feed self, but is a "picky" eater. Often chooses by taste rather than	Develops a personal pattern of prayer and communication with God and family. Experiments and	Usually knows the right thing to do, but is peer-oriented. Christian peer group essential. Questions every-	Able to share faith and assist in basic follow-up. Usually zeal exceeds actual ability and long-term	Wants to do things independently with peers and desires adult involvement at a distance.	Failure to anchor in a good peer group and begin ministry can be catastrophic.

Spiritual Development Stage	**Values Rationale**	nutrition. **Bible Study Nutrition**	checks results. **Prayer Communication**	thing. **Nurture, Shelter & Protection**	commitment. **Evangelism Procreation**	**Ministry Opportunities**	**Concerns and Dangers**
	Interdependency		**Focus on All**				
Young Adults	Law & order. Values based upon rights and standards.	Independent with an emphasis upon a definition of orthodoxy. Can lead others.	Growth in prayer life and spiritual communication in the family.	Independent. Seeking balance between law and grace. Often struggles with tolerance	Effective in sharing faith and able to nurture new Christians with the assistance of family.	Strong supporters of the church with a need to serve.	Lack of service and involvement lead to regression or displacement Beware of empty disputations.
Adulthood	Values based upon principles.	Independent. Can select and prepare for self effectively. Knows Bible well and may be an effective counselor	Balanced, personal prayer patterns are practiced. Shares well and intercedes.	Lives by grace while accepting rules. Readily accepts others and is slow to condemn.	Able to effectively evangelize and raise spiritual children.	The backbone of the church. Sacrificial servants with an outward vision.	If not actively involved will leave everything to younger generations
Elderly	Lives according to principles.	Independent but weary. Enjoys being fed by others and seeing others grow.	Prayer warrior. Close spiritual contact with God and others.	Independent but inclined to rest in the arms of the family. Loving and tolerant of youth.	A strong supporter of evangelism and spiritual child rearing. Can lead, but prefers to encourage.	Great source of wisdom and guidance. Strong encouragers.	If not encouraged and ministered to, will fade away.

Summary

As ministers we are often viewed as spiritual guardians of congregations. Like parents raising large families, we are faced with meeting the spiritual needs of each member of our congregation. Conscientious ministers do well to understand the various stages of spiritual development and acknowledge their responsibility in helping a spiritual baby develop into a mature Christian.

Spiritual development has many parallels with human development. The notion of development suggests our members go through predictable stages from spiritual conception through maturity. Each stage brings milestones, opportunities, and concerns. Ministers who are knowledgeable of these various stages are best prepared to assist and optimize spiritual growth. The primary benefit of nurturing believers through developmental stages is assured spiritual health and maturity in the context of a strong church family.

The *Spiritual Growth and Development Table* briefly outlines seven stages of spiritual development. Spiritual guardians will find raising a strong spiritual family much easier if they are aware a believer's passage through these stages.